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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER HUN SEN DEFENDS HIS RIGHT TO RESPOND TO HIS
CRITICS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Prime Minister Hun Sen, known for his off-the-cuff remarks, lashed out spontaneously in a graduation speech August 12, during which he railed against real and perceived criticism from opposition parties and the international community. He warned that while he would use legal means to respond to his critics, he would meet political or military challenges in kind, using force if necessary. Separately, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement asserting that Cambodia is more than ever committed to the protection of human rights and that freedom of expression must be exercised within the rule of law. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The Prime Minister used the occasion of his speech August 12 at the graduation ceremony at University of Law and Economics to give his own views on the meaning of the "rule of law." He stated that lawsuits against him would be met with countersuits and he threatened that he would meet political or military challenges with like force. Local English language media quote the Prime Minister as further boasting that he would be able to silence all opposition voices "in two hours" if he were to decide to use force, rather than pursue the matters in court. "You wouldn't be able to run. All of you would be arrested," he is quoted as saying.

¶3. (SBU) He made emotional and personal attacks on his critics, some of which were clearly directed at Mu Sochua, and repeated the same derogatory phrase against an unnamed woman who filed a suit against him which ignited the defamation suits in the first place. The Prime Minister repeated previous complaints that some civil society representatives are mere mouthpieces for the opposition. Noting the growing popular support for the CPP evidenced in the 2008 election results, the Prime Minister said that he expected to remain in power until 2023.

¶4. (SBU) The Prime Minister also directed his ire towards the international community, accusing its members of favoring the opposition by applying different standards to their actions. His remarks were directed at representatives of the European Union, who met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials August 7 to express concern about freedom of expression and rule of law, following the spate of defamation and disinformation lawsuits against opposition politicians, journalists, and private citizens. (NOTE: In response, the MFA issued a statement August 11 asserting that Cambodia is more than ever committed to the protection of human rights and that freedom of expression must be exercised within the rule of law. We will send a scanned copy of the statement to the Desk. END NOTE.) The Prime Minister's message to the international community was to give equal weight to his rights (referring to his right as a private citizen to dignity and the right not to be defamed), as well as those of the opposition.

¶5. (SBU) The U.S. drew fire for its involvement in Cambodia's domestic politics in the 1970's. The Prime Minister accused the U.S. of the coup which installed the Lon Nol regime and led to the civil war and is quoted as having said that U.S. soldiers came to Cambodia "to die." He also had sharp words for opposition politicians who have political leanings towards the U.S., warning

against allowing another country to manage Cambodia's destiny.

Comment

16. (SBU) Hun Sen is given to making extemporaneous remarks which often offer a window into his current concerns and pet peeves. His attacks against his critics, civil society, and the international community all reflect his (and members of his government's) assertion of their right to respond to perceived unjust attacks against their dignity and honor. This is consistent with messages from other RGC officials that use of defamation and disinformation suits is not an attack on human rights, but a protection of the victim's rights. As noted in the August 11 MFA statement, freedom of expression must be exercised within the rule of law, and as the Prime Minister perhaps less eloquently stated, such freedoms need to be exercised responsibly, without infringing on the rights of others. However, the government position for honor and against "defamation" leaves little to be said for fair comment against public figures, basic freedoms of expression contained in the Cambodian constitution, or the use of criminal charges of disinformation and incitement to jail critics.

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